

THE CREED  
THE ANCIENT HYMN IN I TIMOTHY 3:16

by  
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This paper treats the hymn in I Timothy 3:16. We will examine the structure of the hymn from previous achievements of scholars, grasp the whole meaning through our study of words, and then consider why the ancient hymn was quoted in the situation at that time.

First, we look at the form of I Tim. 3:16.

Great indeed, we confess, is the  
mystery of our religion:  
He was manifested in the flesh,  
vindicated in the Spirit,  
seen by angels,  
preached among the nations,  
believed on in the world,  
taken up in glory.

The latter poetic six verses are regarded as "a quotation from a liturgical confession or hymn"<sup>1</sup>

According to R. H. Gundry, while Alford understands the hymn on a chronological line from birth to ascension of Jesus Christ, C. K. Barret introduces a sense of "the final victory of Christ at his Parousia" rather than the ascension in the sixth verse of the hymn<sup>2</sup>. That is, for Barret, "the incarnation", "the resurrection", "the ascension", "the mission of the church", "the success of the mission", and "Jesus' final exaltation" are expressed in regular sequence in the hymn<sup>3</sup>.

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1. Fred D. Gealey, "I and II Timothy, Titus," in IB, ed. G. A. Buttrick, 12 vols, (New York: Abingdon Press, 1978), II: 421.

2. Robert H. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning and Background of the Hymn Quoted in I Timothy 3:16," in Apostolic History and the Gospel, ed W. W. Gasque & R. P. Martin (Grand Rapids: W. M. B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1970), pp. 203-04.

3. Ibid., p. 204.

Walter Lock divides the hymn in the middle, and explains: the first stanza of three verses expresses "the Incarnate Lord" which is "seen on earth" and "watched in heaven", and the latter stanza of other three verses expresses "the Ascended Lord" which is "preached on earth" and "lived in Heaven."<sup>1</sup> Robert Falconer has a similar view, but he further stresses that each verse of both stanzas is well matched: "manifested" and "preached", "vindicated" and "believed", and also "seen by angels" and "taken up in glory" are corresponding with each other?<sup>2</sup>

Eduard Schweizer deals with the same hymn, dividing it into three couplets.<sup>3</sup> He makes much of spatial terms which are included in heavenly region or earthly region, and insists that the hymn is constructed in a form of EARTH(flesh)-HEAVEN(Spirit), HEAVEN(angels)-EARTH(nations), EARTH(world)-HEAVEN(glory), which agrees with a form of "Hebraic literature: a-b, b-a, a-b"<sup>4</sup>. Schweizer also comments, while the first verse of the hymn shows Christ's human nature, the other five verses proves His victory to heaven<sup>5</sup>.

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1. Walter Lock, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, ICC, vol. 39 (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1952), p. 45.

2. Robert H. Falconer, The Pastoral Epistles (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1937), P. 138.

3. Eduard Schweizer, "Two New Testament Creeds Compared," in Current Issues in New Testament Interpretation, ed. W. Klassen and G. F. Snyder (New York: Harper & Brothers Pub., 1962), p. 169.

4. Ibid.

5. Ibid.

By J. Kelly, who also divides the hymn into three, in the first couplet Christ's incarnation and resurrection, in the second Christ who is worshipped by angels and preached to mankind, and in the third Christ accepted from both earth and heaven are expressed<sup>1</sup>. This structure of the hymn with three "synonymous" couplets is, by suggestion of Jeremias and Spicq, considered to be correspondent with three stages of "the enthronement ceremony in ancient Ehypt"<sup>2</sup>. That is, "exaltation" of the first stage of the ceremony seems to agree with Christ's "revelation" in the first couplet of the hymn; likewise, "presentation" with Christ's "proclamation" in the second couplet; "enthronement" with Christ's "reception" in the last couplet.<sup>3</sup>

Also with noticing is Gundry's grouping by "synthetic parallelism"<sup>4</sup>. He proposes his opinion that the first verse and the sixth "form a couplet which appropriately frames the whole verse"; the second and the third form another couplet, where "the vindication in spirit leads on to the appearance of Christ to angels"; and the fourth and the fifth form the third couplet, where "proclamation among the nations results in belief throughout the world."<sup>5</sup>

Now, we need to learn several words to grasp the whole meaning of the hymn.

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1. J. N. D. Kelly, A commentary on the Pastoral Epistles (New York: Harper & Row Pub., 1963), p. 92.

2. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning", pp. 207-08.

3. Ibid.

4. Ibid., p.208.

5. Ibid.

The word "φανερόω" means "manifestation before eye" and also it "refers to the appearances of the Risen Lord"<sup>1</sup>. So the word seems to be applied to Christ's "revelation" by His birth and resurrection<sup>2</sup>. S. G. Wilson further suggests that "pre-existence" of Christ may be implied in the verb<sup>3</sup>. The word "σάρξ" is applied to "the weak flesh that we share"<sup>4</sup> and also to "the crucifixion"<sup>5</sup>. So the first phrase shows the whole life of Christ incarnated on the earth, which includes His birth, suffering, death, and resurrection<sup>6</sup>.

The word "δικαίω" is applied to "an act of God in the saving present"<sup>7</sup>. So the second phrase reminds us Christ's divine action: "his anointing with the Spirit at baptism", "his miracles, exorcisms, preaching, and spotless life through the Holy Spirit", and His resurrection and ascension are suggested<sup>8</sup>.

The word "ὁράω" usually expresses "the presence of the God who reveals Himself in His word."<sup>9</sup> However, "ὡφθη ἀγγέλοις" in I Tim. 3:16 does not refer to the appearances<sup>10</sup>, rather, it points to "angelic observation" of Jesus Christ<sup>11</sup>. According to Lock, angels "watched the earthly life of Christ" and "still watch His working

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1. Gerhard Kittel, Theological Dictionary of the New Testament, trans. & ed. G. W. Bromley, 10 vols. (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 9:5.

2. Ibid.

3. Stephen G. Wilson, Luke and Pastoral Epistles (London: SPCK, 1979), pp. 84-85.

4. Lock, A Critical and Exegetical, p. 45.

5. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p. 209. 6. Ibid.

7. Kittel, Theological Dictionary, 2:215

8. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p. 212.

9. Kittel, Theological Dictionary, 5:358.

10. Ibid., 5:360. 11. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p.215.

from heaven."<sup>1</sup> We may be suggested the recognition of Christ from heavenly beings in the third phrase, as "Without lordship over these unseen powers Christ would not be the Kyrios."<sup>2</sup>

About "κηρυσσω", we must learn that Christ Himself is living as "the true preacher" "in the word of man".<sup>3</sup> That is to say, Jesus Christ preaches Himself through men's voice among people. The word "εθνεσιν" " means "nations" or "Gentiles", but as contrasted with "angels" in the third verse, "nations" which covers all people, including gentiles, seems to be proper.<sup>4</sup>

"Πιστεναιν means 'to rely on', 'to trust', 'to believe'.<sup>5</sup> As "Kerygma and faith always go together."<sup>6</sup> "to be believed" in the fifth verse seems to be the result of "to be preached" in the fourth.<sup>7</sup> Here we see the confession of men's great turnover from "hostility to God" to "faith" in God.<sup>8</sup>

Gundry insists, "'taken up in glory' refers to the ascension rather than to the final glory of Christ at his Parousia,"<sup>9</sup> by his etymological study of " αναλαμβανω".<sup>10</sup> It is most important that Jesus Christ is given "divine majesty".<sup>11</sup>

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1. Lock, A critical and Exegetical, p. 46.

2. Oscar Cullmann, The Christology of the New Testament, trans. S. C. Guthrie and A. A. M. Hall, (Philadelphia: The Westminster Press, 1959), p. 223.

3. Kittel, Theological Dictionary, 3:707-08.

4. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," pp. 215-16.

5. Kittel, Theological Dictionary, 6:203.

6. Ibid., 6:209.

7. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p. 216

8. Ronald A. Ward, Commentary on 1 & 2 Timothy & Titus (Waco: Word Book Pub., 1976), p. 66.

9. Gundry, "The form, Meaning," p.216.

10. Ibid., P. 204. 11. Kittel, Theological Dictionary, 4:8

On the base of our word study, we will interpret the hymn. God incarnated Himself in a human body of Jesus Christ, and He shared the same weakness with us on the earth. But He also proved God's saving action through His life. He worked miracles, and after the Crucifixion was resurrected and ascended into heaven. His working was watched and recognized from both heaven and earth, and the sinful world turned its course to God. Then, Jesus Christ came to the heavenly throne.

The central theme is Jesus Christ, His absolute majesty to be able to reunite "heaven and earth"<sup>1</sup>. Now, Schweizer considers that the expression of the lordship of Christ by using a special terms of heaven and earth signifies its Hellenistic background, which is contrary to the Palestinian Jew's view point represented in another hymn in I Cor. 15:3-5.<sup>2</sup> Gundry finds "an early Palestinian Jewish matrix rather than a 'Hellenistic' one" in the background of the hymn in I Tim. 3:16.<sup>3</sup> Whether the hymn had been made in the Hellenistic or in the early Palestinian Jewish background, why did the author quote the confessional hymn in the letter ? Gundry answers, the hymn "which grew out of persecution and exulted in the success of Christ and the gospel" was reapplied "to the rising threat of incipient gnosticism"<sup>4</sup>. However, there are

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1. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p. 207.

2. Schweizer, "Two New Testament Creeds," pp.166-73.

3. Gundry, "The Form, Meaning," p.220.

4. Ibid., p. 222.



controversies about the threatening. We recognize the influence of Jewish, Jewish Christian, and/or Mariconite heresy in addition to Gnostic heresy within the range of possibility of the letter's background, and the answer of "What is the heresy?" seems to depend on the date of writing.<sup>1</sup> This paper does not intend to judge the date and the heresy, rather we'd like to look for the reason why the author quoted the hymn.

S. E. Johnson says, "The little rhythmical formula in I Tim. 3:16 shows that something like a creed is beginning to develop."<sup>2</sup> A creed is, by J. C. Beker, formed to defend church from "threat of heresy".<sup>3</sup> Even if there are some variations of expression, the basic concept of Christian creed is "Jesus Christ is Lord", which is formed against the Emperor worship<sup>4</sup>. In this sense, the hymn in I Tim. 3:16 is obviously a creed.

Such creedal fragments may have been used in the worship service of the church and are often introduced with the formula: "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance" (I Tim. 1:15; 4:9)<sup>5</sup>

The author seems to utilize the creedal hymn to strengthen the foundation of church, because firming its self-identity is the best way to combat with enemies from inside and outside<sup>6</sup>. Whether the enemy of the church is gnostic idea or not, there is no doubt that

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1. Gealey, "I and II Timothy," p. 352.

2. S. E. Johnson, "Crist" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962 ed. 1:569.

3. J. C. Beker, "Pastoral letter, The" in The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, 1962 ed. 3:671.

4. Oscar Cullmann, The Earliest Christian confessions, trans. J. K. S. Reid (London: Lutherworth Press, 1949), p. 27.

5. Beker, "Pastoral letter, The," 3:674.

6. Ibid., 3:671.

the hymn was formed in a different background from the whole letter's. The hymn was quoted to reapply to the church in some different situation. Such a reapplication of the ancient hymn to a different situation is depending on the supereminent lordship of Jesus Christ. Only the perfection of Christ's lordship can defend His church from any threat and maintain the body soundly.

Through our study of form and words, we learned that Christ's lordship recognized from both earth and heaven were expressed in the hymn in I Tim. 3:16. The hymn which has a creedal character was not created by the author, but quoted. The author seems to encourage the Christian church in crisis, by quoting the creedal hymn which has been formed in battle with menaces.

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